

The Gathering Church
Dawn Warner - message 9/13/26

My Story Matters
Discovering Who I am
Deepening My Journey
Seeing God in Every Step

Remain in Me
Produce Much Fruit
Use My Story
I'm Not Alone
Work Through Brokenness
Give You Hope
God is Enough
Differences Become Gifts
Complete in Him
God Doesn't Erase
He Uses Everything

John 15:4-5 Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in Me. 5 Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in Me and I in them, will Produce Much Fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing.

Prayer: Lord, I give you this time. I ask that you Use My Story to bring healing. Lord, strip away our shame so that we can see how much you love us and have called us to use our lives to glorify you.

I am the middle of 3 sisters. I bought sister shirts once that said...

I'm the oldest, I make the rules,
I'm the middle, I'm the reason we have rules, and
I'm the youngest, the rules don't apply to me.

I grew up with all the classic middle child issues. I was rebellious, I was easily distracted from the path I was supposed to be on. I don't like following rules. I like peace.

As children we soak in what others say about us. The enemy plants negative messages early. And the negative is always easier to believe.

Looking back, I can see that one of the first lies the enemy ever convinced me to believe about myself began when I was just a little girl. I was in first grade when I got a D on my report card. I don't know if anyone told me I wasn't smart, but somehow that was the message my little six-year-old heart received.

I'm not smart.

And over time, that became something more:

I'm not smart enough.

I'm not good enough.

I'm probably never going to amount to anything.

What began as a grade on a report card slowly became part of the way I saw myself. Self-doubt and shame had found their way into my identity. I didn't recognize it as a lie then. I simply believed it.

I married at 21, and after 15 years of marriage we had our daughter. But, while she was still a baby, that marriage ended in divorce. Suddenly, I found myself starting over. I felt like I had nothing. I felt like a failure.

I had a bachelor's degree, and had always wanted to be a counselor, but I never thought I could do graduate school. That old voice was still there—the one that had been whispering since first grade that I wasn't smart enough.

But during my divorce, I went to therapy and joined a group at Park Avenue called DivorceCare. And God met me there.

In the middle of one of the most difficult seasons of my life, I began to feel the Lord calling me to become a counselor. It is just like God..... He was using a season of brokenness to reveal a calling. The woman who went to counseling because her own life had fallen apart began to realize that God might someday use her to sit beside other people while they walked through the broken places in their lives.

But answering that “calling” meant going back to school. And that meant confronting the lie I had carried since I was six years old: **You're not smart enough to do this.**

But God said something different. So I went. I pursued my master's degree in counseling at Liberty University. And when I finally received that master's certificate, I remember what it represented to me. **It wasn't just a diploma. It was victory.**

For the first time in my life, I had tangible evidence standing in front of me that the voice I had believed for all those years had lied to me. I wasn't the little girl with the “D” anymore. And more importantly, I was beginning to understand that I had never been defined by that grade in the first place. The enemy had taken one moment from my childhood and tried to turn it into an identity.

But God took that same woman—the one who believed she wasn't smart enough and wouldn't amount to much—and called her to something that required exactly what she had been convinced she could never do.

That master's degree became one of the first places in my life where I could clearly see God's redemption.

The lie said, **“You aren't capable.”**

God said, **“I have called you.”**

The lie said, **“You won't amount to much.”**

God said, **“I have a purpose for your life.”**

And slowly, I began learning that when God's truth confronts the lies we have believed about ourselves, **the lies don't get the final word.**

God gave me a promise through scripture.

*Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to **Give You Hope** and a future.*

That season holds some pivotal lessons that led me through the hardest time in my life. DivorceCare played a big role in some of those changes. I walked into that group carrying so many broken pieces. But there, I began to learn something I desperately needed to know **I'm Not Alone.**

I learned about grief. I learned that divorce really is a loss and that healing doesn't happen all at once. I learned that God isn't afraid of our broken hearts. He meets us in them. He walks with us through grief,

and somehow, in ways we may not understand while we're going through it, He can eventually use our story to help someone else. I experienced that firsthand.

After attending DivorceCare for a couple of years, I eventually began leading the group myself. What had once been a place where I went because I needed someone to help me became a place where God allowed me to help others. I was part of that ministry for more than twenty years. **That is redemption.**

Divorce is part of my story. I don't have to erase it or pretend it didn't happen. It is another broken piece of my life that the Lord carried me through. That season of brokenness reminds me of the woman at the well. **Jesus met me at the well.**

He knew every broken piece I carried there.

He knew my fears.

He knew my failures.

He knew the little girl who believed she wasn't smart enough.

He knew the young woman whose marriage had ended.

He knew the single mother trying to figure out how to build a new life.

He knew all of it.

And still, He met me there. Jesus didn't wait for me to put all the pieces back together before He began working in my life. He met me right in the middle of the brokenness and began walking with me. And step by step, a new life began to take shape.

I walked through the divorce. I bought my own place. I began graduate school. I was a single mother raising my daughter. God gave me friendships, wonderful mentors and a community, and somewhere along that journey, something changed inside of me. I became content.

I had been divorced for four years; I wasn't waiting for a man to come rescue me. God had already been teaching me that **God is Enough** and that my life had purpose.

I was attending a young mother mentoring program, and it is when God sparked a desire to one day remarry. So, one of my mentors and I prayed for God to bring me the desire of my heart. And then, in His timing, God brought Kurt into my life. We have a pretty cool story about that we should tell one day.

When I think about this part of my story, it reminds me of **Ruth and Naomi** in the book of Ruth. Their story begins with loss. Ruth was married to one of Naomi's sons. And both women lost their husbands. Naomi had experienced tremendous grief, and Ruth's future looked nothing like she probably once imagined it would. Rather than go back to her own people, Ruth stayed with Naomi and traveled to Bethlehem. Yet God was still writing their story.

Ruth couldn't see what was waiting for her when she chose to keep walking forward. She simply took the next faithful step. And eventually, God brought Boaz into her life—not to erase what had happened before, but as part of the restoration He was bringing after it. I understand that.

One of the deepest desires of my heart was that if I was going to remarry, I wanted to have a husband who would walk beside me—someone who would love the Lord with me and serve Him alongside me. God brought me Kurt. We married in 2006, and this year we have been married for twenty years.

Kurt also brought another person into my life—his son, Jonathan, who is ten years older than my daughter Samantha. Becoming a blended family wasn't instantaneous or effortless. It took time for all of us to adjust to one another and learn what being a family would look like.

But God was still writing. And one of the sweetest parts of that story is that after Kurt and I married; **we served together in DivorceCare**. That was an answer to prayer. The ministry I had once walked into as a hurting, divorced woman became a ministry where I would eventually stand beside my husband and help other people **Work Through Brokenness** and help them have hope again. Only God could write that story.

The place that represented one of the greatest losses of my life became one of the places where God allowed Kurt and me to serve Him **together**. The woman who once wondered what her life would look like after divorce was now standing beside a husband who loved God, helping others discover that their story wasn't over either. Like Ruth, I couldn't see the next chapters while I was living through the loss. But God could.

And I have learned that **redemption doesn't mean the broken chapters disappear. It means God refuses to waste them**. He takes what the enemy intended for evil and uses it for His good.

***Ruth 2:12 (NLT)** May the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you fully for what you have done.*

This scripture speaks to me. As I leaned into the Lord, **God is my refuge and provider**, just as God gave Ruth a second chance with Boaz, I felt God gave me a second chance with Kurt.

So, going back for a bit to when we were dating, I was still in graduate school, and one of my classes was psychological assessment. Poor Kurt; Brave man to date a counseling major.

I decided this was the perfect opportunity to practice what I was learning, so I subjected him to **seven different personality tests! Counseling nerds love assessments**.

And the fact that he willingly participated in all seven probably told me as much about his personality—and his willingness to walk alongside me—as the assessments did!

When Richard Lord was sharing his story one of his “transformative truths” stood out to me. In our pursuit of God, you can’t know God without knowing yourself.

For much of my early life, I didn't really know myself. I knew the things I had come to believe about myself. There's a difference.

I had learned to see myself through the lens of that little girl who got a D and decided she wasn't smart. I knew my insecurities. I knew my failures. I knew the things I wished were different about myself. But God was teaching me to see myself differently.

Graduate school gave me language for understanding personality, temperament, strengths, weaknesses, relationships, and the experiences that shape us. And somewhere in all of that learning, I wasn't just learning how to understand future clients.

I was learning to understand me.

And I was learning Kurt too.

Those assessments confirmed something I was already beginning to see: our personalities fit together wonderfully. Kurt is more social than I am. Over the years, I have actually become more introverted. We don't experience everything the same way, and we don't always need the same things. And that's okay.

Part of knowing yourself is learning that “different doesn't mean deficient”.

That has been an important lesson for me because for so much of my life. When I saw something in myself that seemed different from someone else, my tendency was to wonder whether something was wrong with me. Even preparing to share my story, the enemy said I wasn't good enough.

God has taught me that knowing myself isn't about identifying everything I need to change. Along the journey I started Journaling and God used it to work through feelings and helped me to learn to hear God and appreciate who I am...

1. Sometimes knowing yourself means recognizing:

This is how God made me.

These are my strengths.

These are my limitations.

These are the places where I've been wounded.

These are the lies I've believed.

And these are the places where God is still growing me.

(these would make good journal topics)

2. If you have never taken a personality test, a great place to start is the Myers Briggs Type indicator. You can take it for free at: 16personalities.com

Kurt and I didn't need to be the same to walk alongside one another. In fact, some of the differences between us have been part of the gift (**Differences Become Gifts**). One of my greatest desires had been to find a husband who would walk beside me, loving and serving the Lord. And God didn't give me another version of myself. He gave me Kurt. Twenty years later, we're still walking alongside one another. And apparently, he passed all seven tests. And this is always a game when I find another one for us to complete.

Here are things I still reflect on...

Do I know myself according to the labels, failures and lies I've collected along the way—or am I learning to know myself through the eyes of the One who created, knows, and redeems me?

When I look back over my life, there is a phrase I've used for years to describe my story:
I've had a do-over.

But I've come to realize that maybe what I've been calling a do-over is really **redemption**.

Because a do-over sounds like getting the chance to erase what happened and start again.

God hasn't erased my story. **All of my past is part of my story:** The little girl who believed she wasn't smart enough is still part of my story, divorce is part of my story, being a single mother is part of my story, the fear, the failures, the shame, the broken relationships and the things I wish had happened differently—they're all part of it.

But they don't get to define it. **God does.** And God has taken some of the most broken pieces of my life and used them in ways I never could have imagined.

I went to therapy because I was hurting, and God called me to become a counselor.
I went to DivorceCare because my marriage had ended, and eventually God allowed me to spend more than twenty years helping other people walk through divorce.
I once believed I wasn't smart enough, and God walked me across the stage to receive a master's degree.
I wondered what my family would look like after divorce, and God brought Kurt into my life—not because I needed someone to rescue me. God brought him after He had taught me that I was **Complete In Him**.
And then He gave me the desire of my heart: a husband who would walk beside me loving and serving the Lord.

That's why I identify so deeply with the woman at the well. Jesus knew her; Really knew her. He knew the parts of her story she probably wished she could change. He knew her relationships. He knew her part disappointments. He knew her thirst. And still, **Jesus met her at the well**.

The woman at the well story is in John 4. The woman realizes that she is standing before Someone who knows her story completely. She runs back to her community saying, in essence, *Come meet the man who knew everything about me*. She came to the well during the middle of the day out of shame. People talked about her. She avoided the people of her village. Think about that.
The very things she might once have hidden in shame became part of the testimony she used to tell people about Jesus. Her story wasn't wasted. And neither is ours.

She even left her water jar behind. I love that image.
Because I think we all carry jars to the well.

Mine has held shame: I'm not smart enough. I'm not good enough. I've failed. My marriage failed. What will people think? What if I can't do this?

But when we encounter Jesus, He invites us to put down what we've been carrying and receive something different from Him: **Living water**.

The story of Ruth and Naomi also speaks to my heart. Their story didn't begin with redemption. It began with loss. They couldn't see the ending from where they were standing. Neither could I.

When I was walking through divorce with a baby,

I couldn't see Kurt.

I couldn't see a master's degree.

I couldn't see a counseling practice.

I couldn't see twenty years of ministry.

I could only see the step in front of me.

Ruth couldn't see Boaz when she began walking toward Bethlehem either. She just kept walking.
And God was already ahead of her. That's something I have come to believe deeply:

God is already ahead of me.

And recently, I've needed to believe that again.

Three months ago, I began another journey that I never expected.

After having a hysterectomy, my pathology report came back positive for cancer.

There's something about hearing that word that changes the air in the room. **CANCER**.

Thankfully, the cancer was contained in my uterus, and today I am cancer free.

I am incredibly grateful.

But during that process, I also learned that I carry a gene mutation that increases my risk for other cancers. **And suddenly, here I am again; At another well.**

Another place where I don't know exactly what the future holds.

Another place where I cannot control what comes next.

Another place where **trusting God is the only thing I can do.**

But there is something different about me this time.

I have a history of so many times that God has carried me through.

I can look backward and see His faithfulness.

I can look at the little girl with the report card who believed she wasn't smart enough.

I can look at the young mother walking through a divorce, wondering what her life was going to look like.

I can see myself walking into DivorceCare needing someone to help me- and years later, I am in that same room helping others.

I can see myself sitting in therapy, broken and searching, never imagining that God would use that experience to call me to become a counselor.

I can see myself starting graduate school with that old lie still whispering, *You're not smart enough.*

I can see myself holding that master's degree.

I can see Kurt coming into my life when I wasn't looking for someone to rescue me, because God had already been teaching me how to stand.

I can see us serving the Lord together.

And over and over again, when I look back I can see **God was already there.**

So when I look forward to something I cannot see, I am learning to trust that He is already there too.

Psalm 139:16 God knew us before we were born—He knew every day of my life before I lived a single one of them.

He knew about that D.

He knew about the divorce.

He knew about the counseling office.

He knew about Kurt.

He knew about the cancer.

He knew what was written in my genes before I ever knew there was something there to find.

He has always known me.

I want us to watch this clip from the Chosen of The Woman at the Well...

...Just like the woman at the well. Jesus knew her whole story. And He met her there anyway.

She came carrying a water jar, **and she left it behind** after encountering Jesus.

And I keep coming back to that image because I think I've spent a lifetime bringing different jars to the well. Shame, Failure, Fear, The need to prove myself, The lie that I'm not enough, The need to know what's going to happen next, And now, fear about my health and my future.

Maybe that's what surrender looks like for me today. **Leaving another jar at the well.**

Not because I know what happens next. But because I know the One I'm leaving it with.

And that brings me back to something I've always said about my life:

God gave me a do-over.

But I understand that differently today. A do-over isn't God erasing my story and giving me a better one.

It's redemption.

He didn't erase my brokenness.

He used it.

He didn't erase my divorce.

He carried me through it and eventually allowed me to walk beside others going through theirs.

He didn't erase that insecure little girl.

He showed her that the lie she believed about herself wasn't true.

God has taken some of the very things I once felt shame about and used them to help me love people better.

That's what I want you to hear from my story:

God does not waste our brokenness. God Doesn't Erase our past, He Uses Everything for our story

But we have to be willing to give it to Him. We have to bring Him the parts we'd rather hide.

The failures.

The shame.

The grief.

The things we can't fix.

The questions we can't answer.

The future we can't control.

Because only He can redeem them.

And maybe that's part of what it really means to **know yourself**. It isn't just knowing your personality type. And believe me, after all the personality tests, Kurt and I know ours pretty well.

It's knowing which parts of your identity came from God—and which parts came from wounds, shame, fear, other people's opinions, or lies you began believing somewhere along the way.

It's being willing to ask:

What am I still carrying that God is asking me to put down?

We're about to sing *Make Room*, and there are words in this song that have become my prayer in this season:

"Here is where I lay it down, every lie and every doubt... this is my surrender."

That's where I am today.

I'm laying down the lie that I'm not enough.

I'm laying down the shame of the broken pieces of my story.

I'm laying down the need to understand everything.

And I'm laying down the fear of what might happen next.

I'm making room for God.

Not just to do what I want Him to do.

*But to do whatever **He** wants to do.*

Because after all these years, I know something about the God I'm surrendering to.

My brokenness does not disqualify me.
I've seen what He can do with broken things.

I've seen Him redeem them.
I've seen Him use them.
I've seen Him turn pain into purpose.
And I trust Him.

So this is my prayer today:

Lord, here is my story.
All of it.
The beautiful parts and the broken parts.
The things I understand and the things I don't.
The chapters You've already redeemed and the chapters You're still writing.
I make room for You.

Because my story isn't over.
And neither is yours.

Because I can't redeem my story.

Only Jesus can do that.

I can hide the broken pieces.
I can be ashamed of them.
I can spend my life wishing they hadn't happened.

Or I can bring them to the well.

And I can trust the One who already knows every single thing about me.
Maybe knowing yourself isn't about finally having yourself completely figured out.
Maybe it's about knowing who you are **because you know the One who created you.**
The One who knew you before you were born.
The One who meets you at the well.
The One who walks with you through loss.
The One who goes ahead of you into places you cannot yet see.
And the One who can take every broken piece we surrender to Him and somehow— **redeem it.**

So when I say that my life has been a “do-over,” I don't mean that God gave me a different story.

I mean He took the story I actually had— **and redeemed it.**

And He's not finished yet.